

Progress, pressures and politics: challenges at self-regulatory media councils in South East Europe



*Catherine Speller is a consultant working on communications, media and policy matters who recently completed a **report** for UNESCO on the needs of media councils in South East Europe. She previously spent seven years at the UK Press Complaints Commission. Here, she highlights the main challenges faced by the self-regulatory media councils in this region.*

Anyone who has followed the post-Leveson debate about the establishment of a new media regulator will know just how difficult it is to find consensus about what an effective self-regulatory mechanism should look like. Here in the UK, there is a long tradition of robust discussion around the merits of the institutional set-up, with governance, powers and sanctions, and independence just three of the areas that consistently come under scrutiny. But what about beyond the UK? What challenges do media self-regulatory organisations face in more fragile political and economic climates, and how can development assistance to strengthen self-regulation best be targeted? This question formed the starting point for a new piece of UNESCO-commissioned research about the work of five media complaint-handling councils in South East Europe, the result of which has recently been **published** online.

With project funding from the European Commission, UNESCO has supported **media accountability in South East Europe** since 2012, as part of the Organisation's broader work to **foster freedom of expression and media development**. With the three-year project drawing to a close, a report was commissioned which assessed the state of play at the five media councils currently operating in the region – in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – with a view to informing potential programming for the future. This was essentially a fact-finding mission, involving the navigation of a mass of information, data and different points of view (of which there were many – some things are universal). The report provides a snapshot of each council, with each chapter comprising an overview of operations, a summary of the organisation's main strengths and the key challenges it faces, and some initial recommendations for future actions and activities.

So what are the main conclusions with regard to the councils' needs? As the report makes clear, it's wise to be cautious about drawing too many generalisations on the basis of shared geography. The councils have varying levels of experience (the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia started work under a year ago, while the Press Council in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been operational for 15 years), which inevitably has an impact on how well established they are. Importantly, there are also significant differences in terms of the political landscapes in which the councils are situated, as well as variations between the councils' day-to-day operations. Both of these things can make a comparative analysis difficult. However, a number of overarching issues stand out as common challenges.

Common challenges

The first is funding. All five councils (with the exception of Montenegro, which is a special case) are almost entirely dependent on funding from the international community. Despite the fact that media members of the councils are generally expected to make a financial contribution, in practice, this rarely happens. Accordingly, all of the councils are under pressure to fundraise for their own futures, and there is an inherent vulnerability in relying to such an extent on external support. Encouraging a greater degree of long-term financial sustainability is a thorny issue to tackle, particularly given the difficult economic climate in the region and the according **y difficult**

conditions in which journalists themselves operate. This is likely to remain a challenge in the years ahead.

The second challenge concerns compliance. In Serbia, for example, some of the Press Council's rulings following an upheld complaint have been selectively edited by the publication in question before they are published, while in FYR Macedonia, the new council is yet to see one of its rulings published by the media outlet under complaint. The situation is of course more complex than this brief summary is able to describe, and it's important to stress the considerable progress that has been made to encourage a culture of cooperation with media, including by means of ongoing educational and training projects. There are perhaps some bigger questions to ask here, both about the expectations of voluntary-based systems and about how membership arrangements operate, particularly given that some councils have issued rulings about titles that are not members.

Thirdly, there is the issue of how the councils can best respond to the huge technological changes impacting journalism. All five councils already deal with complaints about editorial content produced by online-only news publishers, while some have ventured into running dedicated projects to deal with issues that can occur in the online space, such as hate speech. A number of strategic and practical questions linked to the councils' role here are still to be fully resolved, for example: where do the boundaries lie between the councils' remit and that of other regulatory agencies? How can the councils' limited resources most appropriately be targeted to engage with some of these new players? There will be further policy thinking to do in this area in the months and years ahead.

What's next?

What next then for the councils, following the report's whistle-stop tour of the region? Using the report as a starting point, each council will now develop detailed project proposals for future support, which will be considered by UNESCO in the framework of a forthcoming project to continue to support self-regulation. The fact that the report has been made publicly available is good news, since donors, policymakers, academics and other media councils can use and build on the information it contains – perhaps in a more coordinated way than has been the case until now – as part of their own work on self-regulation. The answers to some of the challenges faced by the councils may not always be straightforward, but now with this information collated for the first time, the progress that the councils are making can be recorded and tracked more easily by anyone who is interested in their work.

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